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## Beckett in New Orleans Communities and Commodities

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This article addresses the commodification of *Waiting for Godot* in community intervention theatre, with particular focus on Paul Chan's 2007 production *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*. It examines three forms of community that emerge in response to the project: artistic, social and local. By considering the ways in which the New Orleans *Godot* deploys these notions of community, it develops an argument for interpretive "thickness" in performing interventionist *Godots*, which, in turn, opens up new avenues for the debate between site-specific and traditional performances.

Cet article examine l'utilisation que le théâtre dit d'intervention communautaire fait d'*En attendant Godot*, en se concentrant sur le cas de la production réalisée par Paul Chan en 2007 à la Nouvelle Orléans. Trois formes de communauté ayant émergé en réponse à ce projet sont étudiées: artistique, sociale et locale. En considérant les façons dont ces formes de communauté sont mobilisées par le *Godot* de la Nouvelle-Orléans, le besoin d'une « épaisseur » interprétative dans l'exécution des *Godots* interventionnistes est mis en avant. À partir de ce constat, de nouvelles pistes sont alors proposées pour le débat sur la question de la représentation en contextes spécifiques et/ou traditionnels.

There is a moment in *Waiting for Godot* when, to the hopeful spectator, Vladimir seems ready, at last, to take action:

Let us not waste our time in idle discourse! (*Pause. Vehemently.*) Let us do something, while we have the chance! It is not every day that we are needed. Not indeed that we personally are needed. Others would meet the case equally well, if not better. To all mankind they were addressed, those cries for help still ringing in our ears! But at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late! Let us represent worthily for once the foul brood to which a cruel fate consigned us! What do you say?

Beckett, 59

While, on paper, the length of Vladimir's speech carries its invective against "idle discourse" into the realm of dramatic irony, its performance, when "vehement" enough, risks turning Beckett's "tragicomedy" into melodrama. If Estragon fails to diffuse the intensity of Vladimir's call to arms, then Vladimir's inability to bring about meaningful change will be overshadowed by the heightened emotion with which he appeals for change. The audience, distracted by this emotional charge, will ignore the incongruities of his grandiose terms. The repeated "let us" should suggest an ironic deferral of individual action to a collective decision (which will never come), but, in the mouth of an actor committed to the integrity of the plea, it may also become a convincing, and compelling, rhetorical impetus for actual intervention, particularly with its appeal to the universal-in-the-particular "all mankind is us." Conversely, if Vladimir does not commit himself to these lines, then the play loses the dynamic, albeit negative, tension Vladimir and Estragon create in neither resigning themselves to the wait ("Let us go") nor resolving themselves in action ("*they do not move*"). In other words, if Vladimir does mean what he says at this moment in the play, and means it too strongly, he risks breaking the play's sustained engagement with waiting.

In his efforts to subdue its rhetorical force, Beckett is demonstrably aware of the dangers this monologue poses. The *Theatrical Notebooks* cut Vladimir's vocal direction, "(*Pause.*

*Vehemently.*),” which suggests an effort to limit the Vladimir-actor’s display of emotional conviction (72, l. 2410). Various movement directions prevent the audience from understanding the speech as an extra-diegetic call-to-arms. In the revised version, Vladimir takes Estragon’s arm and ‘walks’ him in an “almost complete circle,” “broken into two segments by a stop at the top of the circle” (72-73, ll. 2408, 2413; 162-163). The significance of “all mankind is us” is undermined by the new stage direction, “(Pause. *They pose.*)” and the inclusion of a further “help” by Pozzo, both of which also serve to break the rhetorical impetus of the speech as it carries on “whether we like it or not” (73, ll. 2416-2417). This is consistent with other passages in the play, particularly Estragon’s later comment about Pozzo, “he’s all humanity.” Between the imagic and vocal interruptions, Beckett’s revisions insist on defusing the sincerity of both this monologue and the rhetoric of community implied by the phrase “all mankind is us.”

Given these valencies, the monologue implies a troubled critique of any interventionist activism seeking to strip the regulative irony from its moral message. Yet, in its position as the central epigraph in a number of key texts attached to Paul Chan’s 2007 *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, Chan’s artistic intervention in post-Katrina New Orleans, this irony has been stripped. In this essay, I consider the conflicting rhetorics of community created by and around Chan’s project, particularly in light of this problematic invocation. Chan, a performance artist, visited New Orleans in 2006. His visit was, in part, a response to the disaster experienced by the city in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. By ‘disaster,’ I refer to the combination of human, environmental and economic costs caused by hurricane damage, the levee breaches (brought about by inadequate design and construction), and the subsequent failures by the US Federal government (FEMA) in handling the situation. Chan followed his visit with a nine month residency in 2007, which culminated in four site-specific performances of *Waiting for Godot*, produced in collaboration with arts group Creative Time, and theatre group The Classic Theatre of Harlem, in two locations: an intersection in the Lower Ninth Ward and outside an abandoned house in Gentilly. *Prima facie*, Chan’s intervention is an excellent example of sound social activism: the project unfolded with substantial administrative oversight from local community groups; it endeavoured to stimulate local economies through local purchases; members of the team spent substantial amounts of time in New Orleans, working with local stakeholders; Chan himself gave classes at the local universities. However, the social activist motivations of the project began with, and maintained itself through, a particular aesthetic judgement: the decision to perform *Waiting for Godot* on the streets of New Orleans. I aim to address the internal logic of community that underpins this interface between the aesthetic and the social. In this regard, I am less interested in the constitutive features of the performances themselves, which were directed by Christopher McElroen, than in those artistic statements issued by Paul Chan to justify the *Godot* production. As such, my criticism exists in the narrow conceptual lacuna that opens between confirming that the enterprise was a successful social project and agreeing that it was a successful aesthetic production. My concern is in the modalities of community at work in the discourses of the project, and how these modalities might serve to broach, again, the larger question of *Waiting for Godot* as a social activist text. In *Social Works*, Shannon Jackson argues that Chan combines elements of community engagement from both his visual arts and activist backgrounds, and confirms the moderate success of the production as social activist theatre. However, Jackson’s praise for *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* does not address the disruptive understandings of community that emerge in Chan’s texts. Rather than routing this discussion through theoretical work on community as ‘negative’ (Bataille), ‘inoperative’ (Nancy), ‘unavowable’ (Blanchot) or ‘coming’ (Agamben), I focus on the internal logics of community developed in Chan’s statements, and in other documents included in Creative Time’s *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide*. As I will demonstrate, there are three rival forms of community.

The first reference to community emerges in Chan’s description of an epiphanic moment (a ‘hallucination’), when the devastation of post-Katrina New Orleans coalesces into the image of a play:

The stage setting for a play I have seen many times. It was unmistakable. The empty road. The bare tree leaning precariously to one side with just enough leaves to make it respectable. The silence. What's more there was a terrible symmetry between the reality of New Orleans post-Katrina and the essence of this play, which expresses in stark eloquence the cruel and funny things people do while they wait—for help, for food, for tomorrow [...] I suddenly found myself in the middle of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

2010, 26

In context, Chan's epiphany happens when he is waiting for someone to pick him up, as he observes the stillness of the city. Unlike his recollections of other man-made disaster sites, it is a moment devoid of people. If the description evokes comparisons with Caspar David Friedrich's "Zwei Männer in Betrachtung des Mondes [Two Men Contemplating the Moon]," a noted influence on *Waiting for Godot*, it differs from Friedrich's painting by depriving Chan of a companion. Although Chan's 'self-discovery' places him, the observer, at the centre of the scene, he sees *Godot* "embedded [...] in the landscape [as] my way of reimagining the empty roads, the debris" (2010, 26). The first community in Chan's account is therefore the non-community of a single, solipsistic observer.

This condition is brought about, in part, by his 'allergy' to collaborative work: "Making a play is an inherently collaborative process and I'm allergic to working with people. If someone were to stage *Waiting for Godot* in the middle of the street in the Lower Ninth and mobilize the given landscape to tell the twentieth century's most emblematic story on waiting, that someone would probably not be me" (2010, 26). Although Chan's claim to an allergy is somewhat defused by his sustained history of social activism—a history he makes explicit in his artist's statement—it does imply a degree of solipsism: his desire to 'imagine' the play superimposed upon the city is foiled by the inevitable compromise required of that vision in its implementation as a collaborative project. Moreover, his reference to staging the play belies his own original experience of being in the play's setting, shorn of companions or action. He has already 'staged' the play as he sees it: "A country road. A tree. Evening,"<sup>1</sup> sans Estragon, struggling with his boot. City and play have reciprocal imagic qualities that exceed any human element, as this declaration suggests: "In New Orleans in 2007, *Godot* is legion and it is not difficult to recognize the city through the play. Here the burden of the new is to realize the play through the city" (2010, 28). Chan's chiasmus belies the absence of citizens and actors in both city and play as he conceives them. Moreover, his insistence on the 'new' seeks to assert, rather than demonstrate, novelty: a novelty, whose newness will turn out to be rather nostalgic, if one unpacks some of Chan's rhetorical permutations: "The longing for the new is a reminder of what is worth renewing" (26). Any desire for newness becomes a supplement to memory, foregrounding what was already there.

The first community of the play, therefore, is an absent community, in which the play simply provides the setting for Chan's epiphanic moment. The second community is more populated, but one in which the play itself is secondary. In response to a person who said she was sorry not to have seen it, Chan responded "I didn't see it either" (2008, 2). He didn't see it, he explains, because he was too distracted by the other parts of the project. He expands:

Christopher McElroen [...] said to me at one point that the play was the smallest component and our biggest headache. He was right. More than right, he touched on the true scope of the project [...] to imagine the play was the thing is to miss the thing. We didn't simply want to stage a site-specific performance of *Godot*. We wanted to create, in the process of staging the play, an image of art as a form of reason. What I mean is that we wanted to use the idea of doing the play as the departure point for inaugurating a

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<sup>1</sup> Anne Gisleson notes the enigmatic advertisement boards that preceded the performance, which simply reproduced these stage directions. The implication, she notes, is that "the play could have been performed on any street in New Orleans" (241-242).

series of causes and effects that would bind the artists, the people in New Orleans, and the city together in a relationship that would make each responsible for the other. 2008, 3

Chan's transformation here is striking. No longer concerned with the image of empty streets, he has shed his 'allergy' to collaborative work in favour of binding relationships. Chan's experience of working on, and towards, the project led to significant changes in the way he understands both collaborative work and the play. His "reimagining the empty roads," a central conceit of his first account, gives way to the realisation that "to imagine the play was the thing is to miss the thing." The 'terrible symmetry' of the city and the play turns into 'an image of art as form of reason'. His desire to "realize the play through the city" becomes a declaration that "we didn't simply want to stage a site-specific form of reason." His understanding of community shifts from a 'non-community' to a binding relationship in which each member is "responsible for the other." Thus, he writes, "it didn't look like a play [...] It looked more to me like the emphatic expression of a community trying to come to terms with the irreconcilability of it all" (2008, 3). This laudatory communal sense-making demonstrates the profound alteration in priorities the project underwent between conception and realisation. The play as an expression of non-community is reconfigured as an expression of aspirant communal sense-making.

In the midst of this transformation from one community to another, the marginality of the play maintains itself. It becomes "the smallest component and our biggest headache," but it was only ever significant to Chan as a 'stage setting.' Its formal purity as an image is gradually eclipsed by its social use for community development. However, in both guises, "the idea of doing the play" is more important than actually doing the play. The play is a supplement to aesthetic formalism in the first instance, and, in the second, to social activism.

This supplementary function marks Chan's intersection with the long-standing debate between social activist productions of Beckett and formalist defences of Beckett against these productions. The social activist will claim a larger purpose beyond Beckett. The rationale restages Beckett's plays as the site of a larger 'reality' than 'mere theatre.' The formalist defence will contradict this appropriation by claiming that the social activist has not understood what Beckett 'actually means.' Beyond the political interpretation, there lies the kernel of 'true' Beckett. On the one hand, we have Susan Sontag, who famously defends her Sarajevo production of *Waiting for Godot*:

It had nothing to do with "the privilege of the intellectuals!" My visit wasn't intended to be a political intervention. If anything my impulse was moral, rather than political. I'd have been happy simply to help some patients get into a wheelchair. I made a commitment at the risk of my life, under a situation of extreme discomfort and mortal danger [...] This is not "symbolic." This is real. And people think I dropped in for a while to do a play. Look I went to Sarajevo for the first time in April 1993 and I was mostly in Sarajevo till the end of 1995. That is two and a half years.

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Answering to allegations that the Sarajevo production spoke primarily to intellectual privilege, Sontag claims a moral commitment that eschewed politics, at great personal risk, over a period of time. The broader context excuses, even justifies, any liberties taken with the text, in excess of any aesthetic justification. Sontag's justifications for stylistic novelties (a mixed gender cast, where each character is played by two actors tied together) are subordinated to the wider social cause, in turn underscored by the time she invested and the risk she endured. On the other hand, Elin Diamond gives a formalist response to the Sarajevo production that insists on a 'true' reading of Beckett:

They are reading Beckett right but saying it wrong. What is political in *Godot* is not the real suffering it mirrors but the oppressive effects of identification's mirror relations and the impossibility of a politics that necessarily derives from them [...] Beckett finds and

abhors the worst aspects of the identificatory relation: the misrecognition of the other and the concomitant enraged and irrational insistence that the other be me, be captured in my image, and if not, be cast from me, expelled, annihilated.

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*Godot* is not really about ‘real suffering’; it addresses the structural problems of a politics based on ‘identificatory relations.’ If one sees the characters in *Godot* as mirroring the real conditions of the local community, then this identificatory process risks collapsing the play into precisely the dynamic Diamond aims to diagnose: the misrecognition of *Godot* as something “captured in my image.” Staging *Godot* as if it has a mimetic relation to “real suffering” occludes the dramatic thickness that separates it from what Sontag calls “real”: the play becomes the excuse for the real project (social action). But making an absolute claim to what *Godot* is “about” risks reducing the play to a single solipsistic understanding, shorn of the collaborative tensions that mark individual performances or productions.

Both Sontag and Diamond lay claim to the “real,” though each “real” consists in something quite different. The “real” for Sontag emerges in opposition to the symbolic and through her sustained commitment to a process through a historical moment of “extreme discomfort and mortal danger.” The production of the play is secondary: the artistic equivalent to helping patients get into wheelchairs. What matters, in this account, is a “moral” contribution to a community for a sustained period of time: “put in the time, spend the dime” (Chan 2010, 27). Diamond’s “real,” however, is a ‘right’ reading of Beckett, in which the symbolic does not oppose the real. Rather, it underpins reality’s structural operations. The argument between social activist Beckett and formalist Beckett appears irresolvable under these conditions, since they cannot agree on a common ground. However, the implicit common ground is evident in a coincidence between the community receiving the moral contribution (from social activism) and the ambiguity that attaches itself to each new reading or performance of *Waiting for Godot* (in a formal sense). In part, this may be explained by returning to my opening remarks on Vladimir’s monologue, and how these remarks imply a third possible community.

I introduced this essay with a reading of Vladimir’s monologue for two reasons. First, the monologue appears as the epigraph to the Creative Time *Field Guide*, the project’s exhibition guide, and to a number of essays written by Chan about the production. Recontextualised as the book’s opening statement, the monologue loses the ambiguity described above, and intensifies itself as a call for action, to which the *Field Guide* provides a fitting response: look, it says with its combination of essays, newspaper clippings, planning schedules, pictures and other documentation, we have done “something.” But it also introduces an alternative response to the debates that surround those productions of Beckett’s work that address overt socio-political conditions. My underlying impulse is to reassess that recurrent complaint that bedevils social activist iterations of Beckett’s theatre, and in particular, the perception that the implementation of a social agenda ‘transgresses’ the ‘conventional’ Beckett performance. Lance Duerfahrd and Alys Moody have addressed this issue, praising the Chan production in particular for translating Beckett’s work to concerns beyond the merely theatrical. Duerfahrd’s book shows how the production extends our understanding of Beckett to a nuanced engagement with historical specificity (88). Moody draws on work in transnational and cosmopolitan modernist studies, which disrupt the so-called “universal” Beckett, to argue that “*Godot*’s denial of place was made to testify to the dislocation and trauma of Katrina’s effect on the city” (542). She demonstrates how the performance underwent a “creolization,” through an interplay between “the abstraction of Beckett’s play and the localization of Chan’s performance” (539). The transnational ebbs and flows of the production “reflected not the top-down imposition of a mode of high-cultural globalization, but an exchange between locality and globality that left neither Beckett nor New Orleans pristine and untouched” (539). Both Duerfahrd and Moody engage with the complexities of Chan’s localised production, as it pertains to the creation of communities that use the local to resist the global. However, they do risk reifying the local itself in their praise of Chan’s production. Although their responses to the production are mediated by

sophisticated readings of the play text, they do not address the conventional, even simplistic, understandings of both Beckett's theatre and New Orleans culture that seem attendant to Chan's 'transgressive' interpretation, that it is "the twentieth century's most emblematic story on waiting" (26). It is worth noting that, in their efforts to be transgressive, some social intervention interpretations remain conservative in their understanding of the play. Even as Vladimir, in his desire to 'do something,' may easily collapse the delicate infrastructure of the scene, so these productions, more interested in what the play will do than in doing the play, risk similarly destructive outcomes.

In putting forward this reservation about such performances of Beckett's work, I risk presenting myself as a 'Peter Fourie.' Peter Fourie, irate at Donald Howarth's 1980 Baxter Theatre production of *Waiting for Godot*, called the production "an aesthetic affront": "Mr Howarth's attempt to give it a local connotation is an affront to the serious theatre-goer and an unforgivable bastardization of one of the great plays of the century [...] How on earth can the tramps refer to the time when they 'picked grapes for Van (der Merwe)'? How can they use words like 'sies'? How can they replace a crucially important song with an African song (in Xhosa or Zulu)?" (Naito, 75-76)

Fourie's reactionary politics are evident in his anxieties about the provincialisation of "one of the great plays of the century." But even if they formulate themselves on the false dichotomy between the provincial and the universal, his complaints nevertheless require me to distinguish my argument from a simple desire to preserve the 'purity' of Beckett's play. The issue here is not whether or not these "local connotations" transgress conventions that "bastardize" the play, since Moody shows how successful such "creolizations" may be. Rather, I wish to ask whether they extend our understanding of it in meaningful ways. For this reason, I return to the question of the local.

Of the three rival communities promised, I have described only two: the community of aesthetic purism and the community of social activism. But what emerges in Moody and Duerfahrd is an emphasis on the local. Thus the third community voiced in *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans: A Field Guide* is the non-participant local. At risk of reifying Anne Gisleson's references to New Orleans communities into a community as such, I turn to her review of the project, "That Tree, That Levee," published in the *Field Guide*.<sup>2</sup> Her criticisms of the project are directed at their assumptions about New Orleans communities: "While I know the free 'gumbo party' and perfunctory brass band were meant to be gestures of generosity, tributes to our unique culture, etc., for me, they also came off as patronizing, or pandering, and wholly unnecessary. Is this what New York thinks we do down here every time more than ten of us get together?" (242)

This startling appraisal sheds new light on Peter Fourie's reactionary politics. It shifts our understanding of Fourie's critique from the simple conservatism he actually espouses to a more complex and fraught interrogation of the modalities of the local used to justify site-specific performances. Instead of understanding the aesthetic "affront" as the inclusion of local connotation, it is Howarth's "attempt" that might be an affront. It is precisely the attempt to appeal to 'local colour' that reifies a community into a commodity. Thus reinterpreted, Fourie's failure to distinguish between IsiXhosa or IsiZulu, similar, yet clearly distinguishable African languages from South Africa, does not only speak to his ignorance. It also leaves open the question about how that particular song (sung by Vladimir at the opening of Act 2) integrates itself into the style of the play. Didi and Gogo might have picked grapes for Van around Cape Town (the home of the Baxter Theatre, and near a wine-making region), but it would make less sense for that to be the case when the production moved to the Market Theatre in Johannesburg (where there is no wine-making). Even so, this relies on what Gisleson calls a commodification of "uniqueness":

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<sup>2</sup> Her title references the small, yet significant change to the script in the Lower Ninth Street performance: Wendell Pierce, playing Vladimir, replaces "bog" with "levee" when he comes to the line "that tree... (*turning towards auditorium*) that bog...".

It may seem like the apex of cynicism to bitch about free gumbo and paid musicians, but joyless artificial second-lining makes even natives feel like awkward conventioners. With all this post-Katrina cultural boosterism, I feel as though we're in danger of self-parody and provincialism, always pointing our fingers back at our own "uniqueness" but always at the same uniquenesses, which become more and more commodified [...]

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The "second-line," a local term for New Orleans street bands, is precisely one of those "uniquenesses" commodified in HBO's *Treme*, the series developed by David Simon (*The Wire*) to tell the story of post-Katrina New Orleans. It cannot be without significance that *Treme* began production soon after, in 2008, and also starred Wendell Pierce (Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*). The production employed New Orleans musicians to perform, which indicated its "local" investment. But it then sells this "authentic New Orleans" to its audience: Gisleson's "self-parody and provincialism." We must understand *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans* within the context of such "post-Katrina cultural boosterism."

It is significant that Gisleson modifies the intensity of her critique by noting how extraordinary the production itself was. "Great art experiences," she notes, "are often about opening up and connecting with something outside of yourself or synthesizing your own experiences with someone else's vision." (243) While Gisleson mentions "vision," and follows this up with a number of remarks about the setting, it is clear that sound plays an important part in realizing the local experience. The production does integrate Mardi Gras Indian chants (Vladimir's song), Southern Baptist oratory (Pierce's Vladimir on the two thieves: "only one speaks of a thief being saved" [12]), and syncopated speech (J Kyle Manzy's Estragon syncopates his memory of "the maps of the holy land" [12]).<sup>3</sup> The primary aesthetic impact of the production may be Chan's original solipsistic "hallucination" (the community of none). The secondary social impact may have been the successful creation of a community around this project. But Chan is incorrect to think of the play as secondary to the project as such: it is simply secondary to his contribution to the project. For, between his visual and social communities, there emerges a third possible community: a community of sound brought into being by a shared series of phonic practices. It is the veracity of sound that distinguishes local practices (patterns of speech and music) from their reified counterparts ("joyless artificial second-lining"). The distinction is significant. New Orleans post-Katrina may have been waiting for aid, FEMA, gutting and rebuilding. Parts, as Chan notes, might have been relatively untouched, while other parts were almost completely destroyed. But, by 2007, it had also begun to commodify its uniqueness.

Commodification damages neither the 'nostalgic' image-concept of "realizing the play through the city" nor the instrumental aspect of social cohesion, attached to the project as a community development enterprise. If anything, condensing the former into a commodity will ensure much greater publicity, and therefore capital raised, for the latter. However, it does threaten to replace actual local customs with reified performances of local custom. Gisleson's "apex of cynicism" is thus germane to this situation. But it might also be germane to the wider question of commodification in Beckett's works, if one considers the depth and nuance of Beckett's own cynicism.<sup>4</sup> What such cynicism implies is the need for a "thickness" in the interpretation, which, while present in the actual performances of *Waiting for Godot in New Orleans*, is absent in Chan's texts about the production. This thickness describes the valencies of Vladimir's monologue, but it also nuances a 'nostalgic' commodification of the local attendant to any inclusion of local aspects. The success of Chan's production as an image, and as a social vehicle, should not prevent us from a certain wariness about the relative "thinness" of his interpretation. Thus, when Wendell Pierce utters his call to arms as Vladimir, he may

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<sup>3</sup> My references to the performance are taken from the bootleg film version available at UbuWeb: [http://www.ubu.com/film/chan\\_godot.html](http://www.ubu.com/film/chan_godot.html)

<sup>4</sup> I argue elsewhere that Beckett's cynicism is a "tactic" he uses to occupy a "plastic" third space that neither fully resists, nor fully accommodates, his own commodification.



truly wish that, as Wendell Pierce “Gentilly native,” we can “do something” (Gisleson, 243; Beckett, 59). But if the play is to maintain its fragile tension, we, his audience, must remain somewhat cynical about this “something,” at least until the play ends. Otherwise, we risk losing what is local about community to “the local,” its reified counterpart.

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